

# The Complex Past of Meir Kahane

By MICHAEL T. KAUFMAN

The story of Meir Kahane moves from Talmudic academies in Brooklyn to a congregation that rebuffed him, to an existence under an assumed name unknown to most of his friends and then to the re-emergence of Rabbi Kahane—this time as the founder of a militant Jewish group embroiling itself in international controversy.

As founder of the Jewish Defense League he has with little more than a mimeograph machine drawn the recognition—and condemnation—of the United States, the Soviet Union, Israel and the major Jewish organizations in the United States.

But until three years ago there was no spotlight of attention. To those who knew him then only as Meir Kahane he was simply the eldest of two sons of a highly regarded Talmudic scholar. He was a brilliant student, an ordained rabbi with graduate degrees in law and international affairs.

And for those who, at the same time, knew him only as Michael King, he was the resident of an East Side apartment who spent time in Washington as the partner in a small company that sought Government contracts for political research. Under that name he wrote papers and books and once organized a student movement to support the war in Vietnam.

Only once were the two names linked on the public record. That was in 1967 when a book called "The Jewish Stake in Vietnam" was published by the research group. Two of the three authors listed on the jacket were Michael King and Meir Kahane.

The other day, during an interview in which a New York Times reporter told the rabbi that facts of his past had come to light, Rabbi Kahane was asked why both names were used on the book.

"I really don't know," he answered with a sad, small

smile. "I suppose I wanted those who knew me by either of the names to know I had written it."

The interview took place in a viewing room of a television studio where the rabbi had just finished taping a program. In front of the cameras he spoke with authority of his group's recent harassment of Soviet personnel here. In the interview about his earlier life, his tone was less assured.

The rabbi said he had first started using his Anglicized pseudonym in 1962, more or less as a lark. Sometimes he would write articles for neighborhood newspapers as Meir Kahane and, at other times, as Michael King. But it was not until 1965, he said, that Michael King became a way of life.

From the details of his dual existence it appears that under both names the man was motivated by personal ambition and a strong social consciousness.

In these pursuits he met frustration. He unsuccessfully tried to make his Conservative congregation more Orthodox. He failed the state bar examination and would not take it again. He had ambitions of emigrating to Israel and rising to high influence, but the ambitions came to nothing.

Under the name of King he, by his own account, "postured" as a man to be taken seriously in Washington political circles and in the intelligence bureaucracy. Again, by his own account, this came to nothing.

But then in 1968 he founded the Jewish Defense League. Supported by a legion of adolescent followers, and with the force of his own personality, he projected himself as a defender of his people.

In speeches before synagogue groups, he elicited a basic response in many American Jews who had never felt themselves assimilated and who looked upon the traditional Jewish organizations as distant.

## In Context of History

His appropriation of the phrase "Never Again," hit home, even to Jews who decried his tactics, conjuring up a complicated and possibly inexpressible feeling of historical continuity in the face of barbarism and oppression.

And as Meir Kahane he succeeded, where earlier as Michael King he had failed. He had influence, power and a

The beginnings were in a second-floor apartment on Second Street in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, where Martin, as he was called then, grew up, the first-born of Rabbi and Mrs. Charles Kahane.

The Kahanes are a tightknit family and the parents speak with great pride of Meir and his brother Nahman, who is the ranking civil servant in Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs.

In the study where Charles Kahane once painstakingly translated the five books of Moses into English, the elderly couple talked recently of the promise they felt for Meir almost from the time he was born on Aug. 1, 1932.

## 'An Idealistic Fighter'

"Nahman is a kind of mystic," said the father. "He considers his brother as one of the outstanding people of our time, an idealistic fighter for a great cause. Maybe destiny sent him to bring redemption to his tortured people throughout the world. May God help him he should achieve that goal."

"Meir was always a sensitive and sentimental boy." At the age of 5 he was operated on for a mastoid and he told the nurse he wanted to read The New York Times.

"He was always interested in books that had to do with social life. When he was 10 years old a rabbi came into the apartment and saw him reading from the encyclopedia about Karl Marx."

As to the shaping of his son's political views, Charles Kahane remembered that in 1932, after swastikas had been smeared on a number of synagogues, he, as head of the Rabbinical Board of Flatbush, had many meetings with local officials. He recalls returning from one of these dejected and dispirited.

"Unwittingly I said it would be a good idea if Jews would organize an underground," he said. "Meir took it seriously. 'That's the only thing we can do,'" he said.

"My house was always a house of Zionist activities. The late [Vladimir] Jabotinsky the militant Zionist revisionist, was in my house. We had a parlor meeting for him. Meir was then a young boy. But he was very attentive."

## Effect on Holocaust

In 1947, the father said, his son and some of his friends threw tomatoes at Ernest Bevin, the British minister, then here on a visit. "He had been impressed by the holocaust and

into concentration camps on Cyprus during the British mandate over Palestine."

After studying at yeshivas, young Kahane attended Brooklyn College at night, graduating in three and a half years. He went to the Mirrer Yeshiva, where he was ordained and began calling himself Meir. He married in 1955. For two years he served as the rabbi for a congregation in Howard Beach, Queens, but he proved too Orthodox for the Conservative, middle-class congregation and left.

At the same time he obtained his law degree from New York Law School, but failed the bar exam. Then he enrolled at New York University, and received

his master's degree in international law.

It was in 1963, his mother said, that Meir went to Israel, leaving his wife and four children for a few months. A relative who does not want to be identified said that at the time of his departure, Mr. Kahane predicted he would soon become a member of the Israeli Cabinet.

His mother said that he had been asked to head the international affairs department at Bar-Ilan University, but that this opportunity fell through. From Israel he wrote to his parents, she said, that he had "met with the chief rabbis of Jerusalem and that he was the first rabbi—an American and so young—to be admitted among them."

Mr. Kahane served for three months as a rabbi on a kibbutz and then returned home. "He was very upset," said his mother, "at all the fighting among Jewish factions in Israel."

## Writing for Newspaper

By this time he began writing for The Jewish Press, a weekly with a circulation of 130,000, using the name Michael King for the first time as a byline on some articles.

As a young man in Flatbush, Meir Kahane had a close friend named Joseph Churba. The two went to the same schools and had attended a camp in the Catskills run by Betar, the revisionist Zionist organization. They were to form a professional association.

Mr. Churba, who also is a rabbi, is today a professor of Middle Eastern studies at the United States Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala.